

INCLUSIVE MULTINATIONALITY VS. EXCLUSIVE ETHNICITY: THE SOUTH ASIAN CHALLENGE

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It is a great honour for me to be here on the occasion of the centenary of Prime Minister S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike. I remember reading about his becoming Prime Minister while I was a teenager in Bombay avidly following politics. I also remember being shocked by his tragic death. His was the first assassination of a major South Asian leader after Gandhi died in January 1948. Alas for South Asia, it was not the last. We South Asians have a bad record when it comes to taking the lives of our leaders. Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto, Mujibur Rahman, Indira and Rajiv Gandhi, Zia ur Rehman and Zia Ul Haq are all names of this sad tally. I need hardly tell Sri Lankans about the problems of political violence.

Yet Solomon Bandaranaike also managed in his short life a remarkable series of transformations. Not just in the country to which he gave his life but in himself as well. Born in one of the elite families of Sri Lanka, he obtained a brilliant Oxford degree, made a smooth transition to electoral politics but then also became a man of the people as a Prime Minister. He was comfortable I am sure with maintaining a multiple of identities. It is an irony of fate that just when he came closer to the people, his life was tragically cut down. But in that there is a lesson for us as we look to the future of South Asia in the next century or indeed the next millennium.

The 20th century has been a mixed blessing to South Asia. In the first instance, a conscious popular nationalism ripened during this century in all parts of South Asia. But also it was only in this century that the boundaries of South Asia were fixed, primarily by the British as the imperial power. As of 1940, there was Burma, Ceylon and then British India plus the native states as well as the kingdoms of Nepal and Bhutan. The notion of India as a nation in the sense of a territory rather than a cultural idea is barely a century old. The demand for an independent India articulated at the Lahore session of the Congress Party in 1930 reminds us how recent it is.

But then while Ceylon retained its territorial integrity and became independent in 1948 in non-conflictual transfer of power, in the subcontinent, there have been two partitions since 1940. The first was that of 1947, which gave reality to the Lahore Resolution of 1930 only by also confirming the Muslim League's Lahore Resolution of 1940. There could be no encompassment/reformulation of traditional old religions. Hinduism, an amorphous mass of beliefs, rituals and gods — a portfolio of religions, if you define religion in a Judeo-Christian way — repackaged into something with a set of sacred books and a firm caste hierarchy and a slimmed down collection of gods. Lately there is an attempt to semitize Hinduism

by having one book, one god, and one priesthood. It is as if in challenge to Western doubts about the merits of Hinduism, the old religion has been abandoned and remade in the shape of Christianity.

The other response was nationalism which was also a philosophy imported from the West but at least it was part of the package of modernity which religion was not. Nationalism began by constructing large inclusive identities based on a common territory. Alternative dimensions of nationhood, such as language, religion and history were smudged over speaking of India in particular.

But the exclusivist strategy of building a religious reformation clashed with the inclusive strategy of early nationalism. Even for inclusive nationalists, religion proved to be an efficient vehicle of mass mobilization. In India thus we had the serious consequence that a secularist but ecumenical nationalism clashed with an exclusivist religion based one. In 1947 this led to the partition of India. Recently the same conflict has revived. This again indicates the difficulties of defining nationhood.

Sri Lanka has been faced with a similar problem. An attempt to define Sri Lankan nationhood on the basis of a Sinhala identity exclusively rather than a multi-ethnic inclusive one as at the time of Independence led to the minority community being alienated. What Jinnah feared might happen to a Muslim minority in a majoritarian parliamentary democracy with a Hindu dominance led to the partition of India. In Sri Lanka, it has led to a continuing conflict which has taken many lives.

South Asia had however grasped the other part of the challenge of modernity or so it seemed for a long time. It embarked upon economic modernisation. In doing so it chose not the well trodden path of its imperial rulers but the alternative yet western path of Leninist economic planning. Being democracies or at least governments subject to popular pressure, they combined state ownership and planning with private sector initiative and markets. If a label can be given to this model, it is best called State Bureaucratic Capitalism (SBC). It worked well for about a decade and a half after independence. But in the middle 1960's, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka all began to have doubts about the efficacy of the path. Yet due to various domestic pressures, their responses were half hearted. It took another decade before Sri Lanka broke away from that model. Pakistan and India have only half broken away with much reluctance from the old model.

The failure of SBC was a deep shock for South Asia. In India, SBC and a secular nationalism got too closely identified in the Nehruvian socialist model. The failure of SBC in South Asia to generate sufficient economic growth has put pressure on the inclusive model of nationalism as well. The resurgence of capitalism in the 1980's as a global phenomenon has increased the pressures of South Asian

governments to break away from SBC decisively. This is threatening to many certainties and is creating multiple tensions. What is to be done? My answer is that South Asia should go forward with economic reforms and rely on its innate strengths which have been made into weaknesses and obstacles by the nationalist drive for a unique identity.

Historically South Asia is no stranger to trade or to markets. It developed a sophisticated financial culture which it took to South East Asia and East Africa even before Europeans arrived. Sri Lanka especially has been an open trading economy in all its history. A model that shuns trade and demote financial services in favor of an autarchic not to say xenophobic model of Industrial development based on the Soviet Union is inappropriate. Not only was Russia unsophisticated in its trade and financial sectors even at the beginning of the 20th Century but the Soviet model has collapsed in ignominy.

But South Asia was also one of the world's most important and populous free trade areas until 1947. There as free movement of goods and services and the currencies were convertible. With Independence, we have broken up that free trade area and hobbled it with restrictions. A massive misallocation of resources and duplication of economic activities have been the result. It is time South Asia learned the simple economic gains from trade both internally and internationally. Each South Asian country is vying with its neighbors to attract foreign capital and trade but shutting the neighbors out. Thus we let MTV Asia create a virtual South Asia market for popular music but place obstacles for local companies doing the same cross border trades.

But above all we have to overcome the insecure search for an exclusive identity. When we are abroad, our hosts find it difficult to distinguish among us as Indians or Pakistanis or Sri Lankans, never mind the distinction between Sinhala and Tamil or Hindus and Muslims. But even our categories are too simple. A Muslim can be Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi or Sri Lankan. She can be Tamil, Telugu, Bengali, Sinhala speaker. What is more she can be living in any of the South Asian countries or none. What do we gain by false labelling?

As I said at the outset, as South Asians we are several things at once. At the lower level kinship/caste defines us, even among non-Hindu communities. Then religion and region have shaped our historical understanding. The experience of being citizens of a nation state has further moulded us. But this territorial state identity most recent in our long history has conflicted with the lower level layers of ethnicity and religion/region. We have to avoid going backwards and collapsing out territorial state identity back into an ethnic or religious identity. We need to acquire a more inclusive South Asian identity which subsumes all the lower identities. This overarching identity will allow us to be simultaneously local, regional, national and multinational. Thus if I may use my own example I can be a Gujarati, upper-caste person educated in Maharashtra, India and USA, resident abroad but with my roots and many friends in South Asia. My fellow South Asian could be a Punjabi Muslim woman of the lower caste (since Muslims have caste in South Asia) living in rural Punjab in Pakistan or indeed in a Sinhala speaking Oxford educated Buddhist man like the man we are honoring today.

Once in the early 1950's, there was a Colombo plan for economic development of South Asia. We need a new Colombo strategy today to reform and revive South Asia. That would be a fitting tribute to Solomon Bandaranaike.

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